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DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

2 June 1986

CHINA: The Lower-Level Third Echelon - Fast Track to Nowhere? ☐

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Summary

Since 1981, China's reform leaders have called upon all levels of the party and government to place promising young technocrats on a fast track for advancement into responsible positions. According to Chinese press reports, lower-level units compiled lists of over 100,000 educated cadre in their thirties and forties to provide a roster of "third echelon" officials in line for favored treatment in promotions. Evidence suggests to us, however, that this program has come under fire for encouraging favoritism and nepotism. Entrenched party officials who see themselves vulnerable have also attacked the program for promoting people who lacked practical experience or proper ideological orientation. ☐

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We believe party guidelines issued in January to meet these criticisms bureaucratize the process by calling for extensive consultations and reviews, making it less likely Beijing will achieve its original goals. Although reformists are still pressing lower levels to rejuvenate their leadership, the fast tracking of third echelon cadre may have joined a number of peripheral reform initiatives that have proven impractical or politically untenable when implemented at lower levels. ☐

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This memorandum was prepared by ☐ Office Of East Asian Analysis. Information available as of 2 June 1986 was used in its preparation. Comments and queries are welcome and may be directed to the Chief, Domestic Policy Branch, China Division, OEA, ☐.

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Promoting the Third Echelon

Deng Xiaoping and his proteges have been remarkably successful in appointing younger, better educated leaders to top national and provincial posts as part of the effort to "rejuvenate" party and government leadership. Cadre in the so-called "third echelon" -- which generally includes officials in their forties and early fifties with university-level educations -- now head many national ministries, as well as provincial party committees and government organizations, and are well represented on the Central Committee.

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Reformist leaders also charged lower level units with rejuvenating their leadership, but progress in our judgment has been much more difficult there. In a speech before a meeting of provincial party secretaries in July 1981, Deng "suggested" that 50,000 young and middle-aged cadre be selected for "testing" in leadership slots by 1985, but at an Organization Department meeting in July 1983, Hu Yaobang noted that after two years of effort, the "building of the third echelon has still not attracted sufficient attention."

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The 1983 meeting kicked off a renewed reformist effort to rejuvenate the lower levels. Media reporting last year indicated that a thousand third echelon cadre in high-level ministerial and provincial organs, and between 100,000 and 200,000 third echelon cadre in lower-level units were placed on "shortlists" for fast track promotions to responsible jobs as they become available. The shortlist program apparently spearheaded a wider rejuvenation effort; the Chinese journal Liaowang recently claimed that as a result of reformist policies, over 2 million "younger cadre" have been appointed to leading posts at various levels.

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Selection Criteria

Officials selected for the third echelon are supposed to conform to the "four transformations": more revolutionary, younger, better educated, and with stronger professional qualifications. In practice, the criteria for selecting lower-level third echelon cadre apparently included age (most are in their thirties or forties), some technical or secondary education, and some demonstrated administrative ability. In addition, party leaders tried to keep youth who engaged in Cultural Revolution-period "leftist errors," such as using physical violence against political opponents, off the lists. Mao-era criteria for cadre promotion, which included class origin and family background, were dropped. Judging from media commentary, the quality of being "more revolutionary" was met by supporting the Dengist reform program. The promotion of third echelon leaders at lower levels not only facilitates implementation of the reforms, but expands the powerbase of the reform group.

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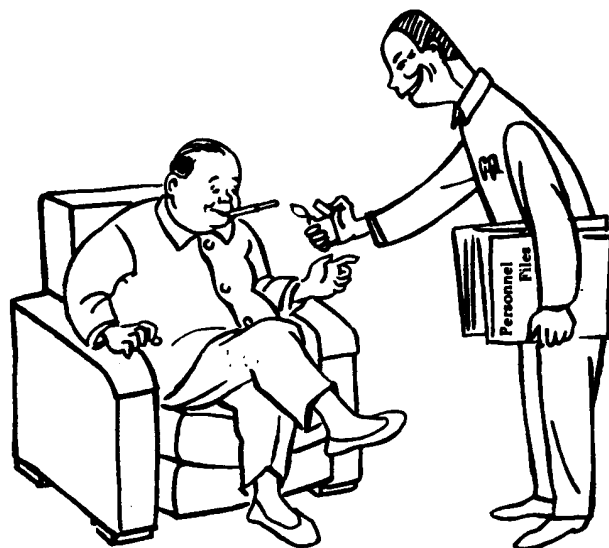
Opposition to the Fast-Track Third Echelon

Warning signs emerged last year pointing to a backlash against the rapid promotion of third echelon cadre. An allegorical study of the 1898 "Hundred Days" reform published in People's Daily in November claimed that the earlier reform failed in part because the "politically inexperienced" emperor moved too quickly in eliminating conservative, aged ministers. The article also claimed that the reformers wasted too much effort attempting to get reform leaders into official posts instead of paying attention to other problems. Hong Kong non-Communist media have carried reports of popular discontent with the rapid promotion of young officials who in the opinion of critics produce "one fresh trick" that catches the eye of the leadership and gain "helicopter" promotions, or cadre who rapidly advance from job to job in "accelerated three-grade promotions." The concern over rapid promotion schedules was voiced in a speech last November by Army Chief of Staff Yang Dezhi, who concluded that an official should "stay at a work post for a fairly long period in order to accumulate experience."

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On the basis of media reporting, we believe some entrenched cadre have used the push to fast track young officials into leadership positions to engage in "unhealthy practices," such as arranging promotions based on favoritism or family ties. A recent provincial report noted, for example, that some departments had promoted cadre who are "submissive, slick, and sly." Other media reporting suggests that cases of leaders arranging for promotion of their children or family members, or accepting bribes for promotions, are not uncommon.

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'Please select a group of cadres for promotion.'
'They should be like you.'

Jiang Yousheng
Selected Cartoons

Source: Ta Kung Pao
November, 1985

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Some lower level units are attempting to promote younger cadre to leading positions without actually dismissing or retiring older cadre by creating new branches or new, unauthorized leadership positions, adding to China's problem of an inefficient, overstaffed bureaucracy. This practice was attacked in a September People's Daily article, which reviewed China's historic problem of bureaucratic overstaffing, and quoted a Tang Dynasty emperor's observation that "the practice of creating posts to accommodate candidates is the origin of unrest." [redacted]

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In order to meet educational standards for new cadre appointments, some localities are drafting school teachers for leadership positions in enterprises and government organizations. As a result, the shortage of teachers has been aggravated, and individuals with no practical job-related experience have been placed in figurehead "leading positions." A circular issued last September in Guangdong province noted, for example, that "in recent years some localities have ignored regulations which prohibit the transferring of primary and middle school teachers to other posts, destabilizing the teaching contingent and seriously influencing the normal operation of school teaching." [redacted]

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New Guidelines Stress Orderly Procedures

Central leadership statements and directives attempted to avert these problems during the drafting of the "shortlists," but the push to advance third echelon officials into leadership positions make such abuses unavoidable. We believe reform leaders recognize they face a trade-off between rapidly implementing their program and tolerating lower-level malfeasance, but abuses reached such a level that reformists were forced to reevaluate the fast track program. [redacted]

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The Central Committee in January issued a "Circular on Promoting and Appointing Cadres Strictly in Accordance with Party Principles," which stressed that cadre appointments must be based on extensive consultations within party units, ideally taking the opinions of "the masses" into consideration. In order to halt favoritism and nepotism in cadre advancement, the circular called for rigorous review of appointments by upper levels, especially when family members of officials are being considered for promotion. [redacted]

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Although not explicitly rejecting the shortlists for promoting younger leaders, the document in our judgment advocates replacing the fast track approach with a slower, more careful screening process. A recent provincial press commentary notes, for example, that the practice of "selecting cadres on a large scale" for the third echelon will be changed to selecting cadre based on "quality, personal morality, and the structure of the third echelon ranks" -- which probably means fewer new positions will be created for these individuals. [redacted]

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The January circular also highlighted ideological outlook as one of the essential criteria for promotion -- a conservative theme that has appeared frequently in recent propaganda. For example, a recent Xinhua commentary notes that although young technocrats do well in some specific vocational work, their "weak understanding of basic

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Marxist theories becomes quite apparent when they take leading posts." A provincial party secretary stated in March that, "It is imperative to put the requirement of being revolutionary in first place. We should guard against the practice of . . . taking the school diploma as the sole criterion for judging a person's education." [REDACTED]

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Implications

Although the fate of the "shortlists" is unclear -- reformist leaders, including Hu Yaobang, continue to call for the rejuvenation of party and government units -- we believe the extensive review and consultation process will probably slow rejuvenation efforts. In addition, stressing ideological soundness and Marxist background as criteria for promotion will please party conservatives, but may hamper promotions for intellectuals or cadre with primarily technical backgrounds. [REDACTED]

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The security of the millions of "younger cadre" who have been promoted into leadership positions is also unclear. We believe that in many cases these officials are stand-ins for older party bosses and are vulnerable. Chinese press reports which call on party elders to be tolerant of the mistakes of third echelon cadre, along with press references to young officials who attempt to implement reforms in their units end up being "shot off their horses," reinforce the impression that many "promotions into leadership positions" have been pro forma arrangements. The slurring of the third echelon with charges of promotions based on favoritism and other abuses probably emboldens older cadre to demote the new appointees if they make mistakes by pushing reforms too aggressively. [REDACTED]

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Reformists continue to search for methods to perfect the cadre promotion system. Regions in Zhejiang Province began experimenting last year with a system of appointing cadre based on the results of written and oral exams. Under this system, the available positions are publicized, and anyone can sit for the tests. The exam method may achieve wider use, but probably will not speed rejuvenation efforts. Moreover, if party organization departments continue to have the final say in the choices, which we believe likely, the exam method may result in additional public frustration over the gap between publicized ideals and realities. [REDACTED]

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We believe abandonment of the "short-listing" program would be a setback for the reformists, but not a serious one. As noted above, reformers have already achieved major successes in placing third echelon supporters in many of the key national and provincial leadership positions. In our view, backtracking on the fast track approach reflects the difficulties the reformers still face in achieving their goals at lower levels. Underscoring this point is the failure of another reformist initiative to remold the party -- the three-year party rectification campaign -- by shaking up lower party levels. Although rectification removed the worst of the Cultural-Revolution-period "beaters, smashers, and looters" from leadership ranks, the campaign has become increasingly perfunctory at lower levels, with virtually no forced resignations. In both the rectification of lower level units, and the fast tracking of third echelon cadre, reformists have found the Chinese political system less flexible than they hoped, and are having to adjust their policies to fit ingrained values and ways of doing things. [REDACTED]

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